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Photographic Data Privacy: Sharing Sexually Explicit Imagery Online

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[to cite]:

Ekant Veer and Maja Golf-Papez (2018) ,"Photographic Data Privacy: Sharing Sexually Explicit Imagery Online", in AP - Asia-Pacific Advances in Consumer Research Volume 12, eds. Shailendra Pratap Jain and Akshaya Vijayalakshmi, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 40-40.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1700321/volumes/ap12/AP-12>

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research takes an exploratory examination of the creation and dissemination (both planned and unplanned) of sexually intimate imagery via digital technology and the effects of this dissemination of personally intimate data on its creator's sense of self. We respond to the conference theme by exploring the impact that privacy breaches may have when one's identity is made public to an unintended audience.

Although creation and sharing of sexually explicit material online has grown in prevalence over the last decade, with 1 in 7 teens engaged in sexting behaviour (Madigan et al. 2018), there has been little research regarding the exploration of way in which sexually intimate and explicit material is protected. This research does not focus on the professional porn industry and wider marketplace for professional porn; rather, we explore the way that everyday consumers are using technology as a means of sharing their sexual selves with a specific audience as a means of sharing their sexual selves, not as a means of generating a profit.

There are a number of ways in which sexually explicit material reaches unintended audiences. Most famously was the cloud yacking of female celebrities' images in 2014, leading to a 'leak' of hundreds of intimate images online (Fox-Brewster 2016). This research seeks to understand how creators of sexually explicit personal imagery protect their offline selves when it is created and shared online. Secondly, we seek to examine what impact a data breach may have on the creator's sense of self and behaviour regarding the creation of sexually explicit material after a significant data breach.

We take an interpretive approach to both the drivers associated with creating the imagery and the consumption behaviour associated with subsequent sharing of the intimate imagery. Interviews with female creators of sexually explicit material were gathered through text-based interviews using instant messenger platforms and digitally mediated video conference software (such as Skype). Data was analysed through a process-theorization lens (Giesler and Thompson 2016), with a specific focus on understanding the phenomena under investigation (that of creating and sharing explicit material and protecting one's identity).

The findings show that many participants reported that the creation and sharing of intimate imagery in the confines of a committed relationship was simply an extension of a technology-mediated sexual encounter with one's partner. Some participants saw it akin to any other sexual engagement they have, but with the added bonus of

not being physically or temporally limiting. However, participants reported that when the imagery is shared beyond the intended or perceived private boundaries there is a heightened sense of vulnerability and loss of control, and an attack on one's sense of self. What enabled the participants to lessen any felt impact on their offline selves was how identifiable they were in the images being shared with the unintended audience. When the creator's identity was easily made public, the impact of a privacy breach was reported to be far greater.

This research contributes both to our understanding of human/computer interactions as well as the way that technology is used as a means of expressing one's sexual self to others. Participants in the study saw the role of sexual self-expression online with an intended audience as a natural extension of their sexual selves; however, when they lost control of the privacy of their identity online, we saw a very different perception towards the sharing of sexual imagery online. Data breaches and the divergence of what is the intended and unintended consumption of their imagery is at the heart of the tension experienced in this research. Participants discussed the impact of a public release of their identity, for the most part, as the most egregious act. This research does not seek to determine whether sharing of intimate imagery should be encouraged; however, if one IS to share intimate imagery, then keeping one's identity private mitigates the negative impact a privacy breach has on one's offline self. We call for further research into these motivations for sharing sexually explicit material online and the subsequent effects to one's offline self if a breach of a consumer's data does occur, as the consequences of a data breach could have far-reaching consequences that are difficult to erase.

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